

THE VARSITY

University of Ottawa dismisses report of systemic racism

Aisha Jamal 01/12/08

The University of Ottawa has issued a denial of a report by its Student Appeal Centre, which alleges systemic racism in the university's academic fraud cases. An independent report, commissioned by U of O, found that SAC's conclusions were drawn from a sample size too small to show evidence of racism in its academic policies.

"In many places, the content [of the report] can only be described as totally unsubstantiated, inconclusive and inflammatory," said U of O law professor Joanne St. Lewis, a specialist in human rights and systemic racism who was asked to evaluate the SAC report. St. Lewis said the report represented only one per cent of the student body and relied on anecdotal evidence.

The student-run SAC is a resource for students who appeal university decisions. Its academic fraud report found that 71 per cent of students they represented were of visible minorities. SAC's student appeal officer, Mireille Gervais, said this statistic and stories of students' experiences of procedural discrimination set off alarm bells.

The student report documents only those students who came to the group for help. These represent a relatively small sample, and SAC does not maintain there is systemic racism in all fraud offenses at U of O. However, when asked if a wider investigation might duplicate SAC's limited conclusions, Gervais responded, "My feeling is that the people we see are an actual reflection of what's [happening] on campus."

SAC alleged that students of visible minority groups are consistently presumed guilty, facing contempt and disrespect in the appeals process. Responding to St. Lewis, Gervais countered that SAC's report was not a scientific study of the whole student body but was meant to be a testimonial of the racism some students encountered.

Both St. Lewis and SAC agreed that students need to be provided proper representation. In the past, SAC's request for students to be informed of their counselling services has been denied by most faculties. St. Lewis recommends that SAC be allowed to advertise its services, but points out that students are allowed to go to the campus legal aid clinic for help.

SAC has maintained that the legal aid clinic clearly said it could not represent

students against the university administration. The legal aid clinic could not be reached for comment.

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